Letter 1

* Captain Robert Walton of England is on an expedition to the North Pole. He writes a series of letters to his sister, Margaret, to pass the time and, you know, keep in touch.
* Walton has some goals: see new places, "tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man" (Letter 1.1), [boldly go where no man has gone before](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HN-q09wRG70), that sort of thing.

Letter 2

* Walton is bummed because he has no friends. He won't be friends with the men on the ship, either, because they are, um, not as awesome as he.
* No one could possibly understand him because he's special and more sensitive than the other men. English majors would probably say he's a [Romantic](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/romanticism.html) figure.
* We say we think we know why he has no friends.

Letter 3

* The ship sets sail, and Walton seems to think that things are going according to plan.
* Since everything is going so well, something bad is probably going to happen soon.

Letter 4

* Something bad happens! We're shocked!
* The ship is stuck in sheets of ice in the ocean when the crew sees a giant figure in the distance going across the ice on a "sledge." (We're thinking "dog sled.")
* The next day, the ship's crew finds another man on yet another sledge. Unfortunately for said man (and his dog team), all but one of his dogs are dead. This man also looks like he has one foot and possibly half a leg in the grave.
* So the crew brings the new guy on board the ship, rubs his body with brandy, and gets him drunk to warm him up.
* (Don't try this at home. This was back before they knew about alcohol, and how it actually lowers your body temperature.)
* Walton wants the new guy all to himself to be the friend he's dreamed of having, which is weirdly possessive.
* At the end of this letter, he tells his sister that the man is going to tell *his* story the next day.

Chapter 1

* The new guy's name is Victor Frankenstein. He's just about on his deathbed from starvation, exhaustion, and illness.
* Even though he's half-dead, he still likes to talk, a lot. Instead of just saying, "Hey, my name is Victor. I created a monster, and now I'm trying to kill him because he killed everyone I know," he has to start with the beginning of his childhood:
* "To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born" style. Get ready.
* He's got parents. They are named Alphonse and Caroline.
* Then there is Elizabeth. Elizabeth Lavenza. Mary Shelley couldn't really make up her mind about how she became part of Victor's family, but we're guessing you're probably reading the 1831 edition of this novel, so we'll say she was adopted from some Italian family by Caroline when Victor was all of five years old.
* Victor's parents thought it would be a good idea to adopt a girl to be Victor's future wife.
* So Elizabeth comes back to Geneva to live with Victor's family.
* Victor accepts this fate. In general, if something is fate, Victor is ready to give in to it. And, as you are about to see, he seems to think an awful lot of things are fate.
* (This is a major difference between the 1818 edition and the 1831 edition; 1818 Victor takes a little more responsibility for his actions.)

Chapter 2

* Unlike Walton, Victor has friends. Two of them. Or at least, he did during his childhood. First, there's Elizabeth. Victor also has a friend named Henry Clerval.
* Victor describes his idyllic childhood, which is a cue for us to begin use of the [historical present](http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/histpreterm.htm).
* As a brooding teenager, Victor develops an interest in science. Especially interesting to him is the old, not to mention discredited, [field of alchemy](http://www.getty.edu/research/special_collections/highlights/alchemy/index.html). He's especially into some guy named [Albertus Magnus](http://www.albertthegreat.com/).
* This is like some kid getting into music and really liking old [ragtime records](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPmruHc4S9Q) from the 1900s.
* Wait, scratch that, some hipster is probably starting a ragtime tumblr right now.
* Victor realizes that science is very powerful, but possibly also destructive, when he sees a tree get struck by lightning. Hmm!

Chapter 3

* Elizabeth catches [scarlet fever](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0001969/). She recovers, but Victor's mother catches the illness while nursing her back to health and dies herself. This is where the bad things begin, if you hadn't already picked up on that.
* On her deathbed, she tells Victor and Elizabeth she wants them to get married. Way to lay on the guilt trip, mom.
* A few weeks later, Victor goes away to study at a university called [Ingolstadt](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/V1notes/univers.html). He's only seventeen.
* Once he gets there, he finds a place to live and starts chatting up professors. Some guy named M. Krempe teaches natural philosophy and basically discredits alchemy entirely, to Victor's dismay. Imagine studying all through high school only to get to college and have your teachers tell you that everything you know is wrong and stupid.
* Luckily, Victor meets a nice chemistry professor named Waldman and decides to study science. The real kind.

Chapter 4

* Victor becomes—and we say this lovingly—a huge nerd. He doesn't make friends, and he doesn't write home, not even to his hot sister/future wife, Elizabeth. He probably doesn't even have a Facebook page.
* On the plus side, Victor's studies advance rapidly, which tends to happen when you're in self-prescribed social exile. Soon, he has mastered everything there possibly is to know in the world.
* In all fairness, there *was* a lot less to know at the beginning of the nineteenth century, like all the lyrics from toy commercials of the '80s and what that one actor who played that kid's brother on [*Saved By the Bell*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096694/) is doing now.
* He becomes obsessed with the way some things are alive and others…aren't really. He wants to figure out how to make non-living things into living ones.
* From a psychological perspective, this probably has something to do with the fact that Victor's mother just died. This is *not* a healthy alternative to counseling, but apparently the University of Ingolstadt didn't have much in the way of Student Services.
* Victor studies anatomy to learn about how bodies live and die.
* He decides he wants to make a new race of creatures, and in his spare time he starts assembling pieces of corpses. No one mentions this, but it probably smells really bad at his place.
* Quick Brain Snack: Anatomy was more of a theoretical science than an actual science for hundreds of years, because Christians believed that you were literally going to be resurrected when Jesus returned—which meant that you wanted to have all your body parts in one piece. There was none of this "donate your body to science" business. Artists and scientists who wanted to see what was actually going on underneath the skin resorted to grave robbing.
* So, where is Victor Frankenstein getting these bodies? He's sneaking off in the middle of the night with a shovel and digging them up—or paying someone to do it for him. (Hey, there's a [whole book](http://www.amazon.com/Murdering-Dissect-Grave-Robbing-Frankenstein-Literature/dp/0719045428) about *Frankenstein* and grave robbing!)
* Yeah, the guy's just a little obsessed.

Chapter 5

* It's obviously a dark and stormy night when Victor brings the stitched-up corpse pieces to life.
* Victor is on the brink of the achievement of a lifetime. He has visions of a Nobel Prize in Potentially Evil and Highly Suspect Late-Night Doings. He has created a superior race of people. He is going to win fame and adoration and …
* Oh wait. The monster is huge and not exactly aesthetically pleasing.
* Victor is roughly thinking, "uh-oh."
* But wait, you say. What's so bad about this monster? Does he club baby seals or throw soda cans in the trash instead of recycling them? Did he illegally share songs on BitTorrent?
* Nope. Nope. Nope. He's just ugly. That's it.
* The monster leans over Victor and smiles at him. Oh, the horror.
* But Victor has just had a nightmare about Elizabeth and his mother's corpses (that's the anvil of [foreshadowing](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/foreshadowing.html) that you just heard thump on the ground), so when he sees the ugly smile, he runs out of his house and spends the night in his courtyard.
* The next morning, Victor goes for a walk. He can't seem to be able to stand being in the same room as someone who is ugly.
* In town, in one of many remarkably convenient coincidences in this book, Victor runs into his dear old buddy Henry Clerval near the town inn. Henry has come to study at Ingolstadt. It's the thing to do.
* Don't worry —Henry is attractive. So it's okay for Victor to be friends with him.
* Victor immediately falls ill with a fever, and Henry nurses him back to health over a number of months.
* Illnesses lasted a long time back then because they didn't have things like penicillin or hygiene.
* When Victor recovers, Henry gives him some letters from Elizabeth.

Chapter 6

* Elizabeth is worried about Victor's illness, and she nags Victor to write home. We are reminded that Victor has at least one good thing going for him right now.
* She also tells him about a girl named Justine who has come to live with their family (as a servant) in Geneva after her own mother's death.
* Several months after the shock of seeing something ugly, Victor finally recovers.
* Henry and Victor both start studying "Oriental" languages in school, and Victor tries to avoid all the science people. They think he is being modest, but he can't stand to look at them or talk to them because they remind him of the huge mistake he has made.
* He decides to return to Geneva. Before he does, he and Henry go for a walk in nature and appreciate how beautiful it is.
* Hmm! Nature is beautiful; there's something unnatural about the ugly creature …

Chapter 7

* Back at school, Victor gets a letter from Dad. It's not good news: it seems that someone has murdered his little brother, William.
* He leaves for Geneva immediately, but he arrives too late, and the gates of the city have been closed for the night.
* Victor lurks around the woods near where his brother was killed.
* He sees the monster he created for a moment. Aha! It must be the monster's crime. Obviously. Because the monster is ugly.
* No one else has seen this monster or knows anything about it.
* At home the next day (the gates have been opened by now), Victor finds out that Justine has been accused of the murder because she has a picture of Caroline in her pocket —the same picture William had with him right before he died.
* Victor and Elizabeth are the only ones who think Justine is innocent. Well, Justine, too.
* But Victor won't tell anyone why, because he's afraid to be labeled a crazy person.

Chapter 8

* Shocking! Justine confesses even though she is innocent so that she won't go to Hell, which … doesn't quite make sense to us, because isn't lying a sin, too?
* Elizabeth and Victor still believe in her innocence, although no one else does. Again, except for Justine.
* Justine is executed.
* Victor at least has the good sense to feel guilty, since his secret has now caused two people he loves to die.

Chapter 9

* Victor continues to feel (1) stupid and (2) guilty. He mopes around, contemplating suicide.
* His father takes the family to their lake house at Belrive to try to put the past behind them.
* Victor goes off by himself to the valley of Chamounix and feels momentary happiness due to how sublime it is (again with the sublime nature bit —pay attention), but the feeling passes.

Chapter 10

* Victor feels awful. Then it rains.
* He goes up to the top of Montanvert to see the views, since looking at sublime views has a way of cheering him up.
* Brain Snack: Montanvert is one of three glaciers on Mont Blanc, a big honking mountain in the Swiss Alps. In 1816, Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a whole poem about how [sublime and awesome Mont Blanc](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hist256/alps/mont_blanc.htm) is. (Well, that's the short version. The long version has to do with the awesomeness of poets, i.e. Shelley.)
* Anyway, instead of cheering up, Victor sees the monster.
* Victor threatens to essentially kick the monster's butt, but the monster looks like The Rock.
* The monster, despite everything, invites Victor to come to a cave to talk with him by a fire. FIRE. Look out for that [Prometheus](https://www.shmoop.com/prometheus/) reference.
* The monster talks eloquently, so Victor consents to listen to his life story. We know what you're thinking. Uh-oh —are we in for another "Chapter One: I am Born?" No. This guy is a lot more interesting than Victor.